



Toward a Meaningful Bat Mitzvah

Edited by Nancy Wolfson-Moche

The goal of this booklet is to share with the Jewish community-at-large our family's solution in creating a bat mitzvah that allowed our daughter to participate fully in a traditional ritual service while at the same time keeping within the broad parameters of the branch of traditional Judaism that our family affiliates with. Our flexible approach also allowed the non-participating community to share in our celebration.

While we had attended several bat mitzvahs at a Women's Tefillah group in New York that was pioneered by Rabbi Avi Weiss, there was no precedent for it in South Florida, our adopted home for the last several years. Our solution was created out of necessity. Our synagogue was not yet ready for a Women's Tefillah; so we created our own makeshift synagogue. How we accomplished this is beautifully described by Nancy Wolfson-Moche; yet it is only part of the story detailed herein.

Blu Greenberg's poignant history of the development of the bat mitzvah and the spiritual development of Jewish women will enlighten readers across the religious spectrum. Rabbi Saul Berman's comments on why Women's Tefillah groups can and cannot include certain prayers break new ground. The responsum of Rabbi Yitz Greenberg on the issue of *Kol Isha* -- the age-old prohibition of women singing in the presence of men -- is a major breakthrough in the evolution of Jewish law. His *halachic* ruling is bound to have widespread and long lasting effects on the Jewish feminist movement and inspire the rest of us with his courage in coming out forcefully on this sensitive issue.

Perhaps my advocacy on the part of women's issues in Judaism is partially motivated by my three daughters; desiring to assure them a participatory role in the traditions and rituals of our people. Perhaps it's because I have seen the effect of these newfound freedoms on the self-confidence of women. I vividly recall a scene some twenty-five years ago in New York in which the women were offered a scroll on Simchat Torah to dance the *hakafot*. The centuries of conditioning have had their effect. Many of the women held back; there was an awkward sense of unfamiliarity and discomfort. The next generation, their very own daughters, however,

have no such reservations. They sit on religious councils, serve as congregational interns (*de facto* assistant rabbis) and read from the Torah with a confidence and assurance that would have been unimaginable to their parents.

In the span of one generation, these women have migrated from the home to the study halls, from the *mikveh* to administering religious courts of law. And yet, much work needs to be done. Access to rituals in Jewish life remains fragmented, with some rabbis and synagogues including women in many aspects of the service, others denying any access at all.

Change is inevitable, but its path is slow and laden with stumbling blocks. Whether these stumbling blocks are the canards of a rabbinical board in Queens or the outlandish gender parables told by the heads of yeshivot, they continue unabated in some segments of our religious society much to the detriment of *Klal Yisrael*. Adhering to a ritual process designed by men for men, these zealots operate behind the cloak of halachic standards. I believe they are often motivated by a fear of the unknown – that the traditional feminists are changing the very fabric of Jewish life, altering the communal structure and affecting the community in ways far more significant than just adapting old rituals as their own. What these rabbis should be concerned about is elevating the holiness of their communities and not with equivocating on the minutiae of Jewish law. And it is the feminists who are raising the bar in the realm of spirituality. When I told a prominent local rabbi that I witnessed more holiness and serenity in the Women's Tefillah of my daughter Felissa's bat mitzvah than in any quorum that I ever attended anywhere in the world, he replied, only half in jest, "It will be that way for the first five hundred years and then they will pray like the rest of us".

I look to the Jewish feminists not only to advance the participation of women, but also anticipate their contribution to keeping traditional Judaism centered, both spiritually and halachically. As an ever larger swath of Orthodox Jewry regresses and harkens back to prohibitions emanating from the sixteenth century, the simmering tensions of gender equality will help infuse a sensible approach to halachic Judaism.

We often underestimate our abilities to effect change. Our rabbi, who is among the most respected emissaries of Chabad-Lubavitch, has in the last several years, evolved with the women's movement. It was clear that if he did not get in front of it, it would have overtaken him. He has allowed Bat Mitzvahs to address the congregation from the pulpit in the men's section of the main sanctuary on Shabbat mornings. (It occurs at the end of services, and Kiddush is made first so that it's technically not considered the "actual" service). They rely on an unpublished response of the Lubavitcher Rebbe that they claim permits this practice. He has allowed a Bat Mitzvah to lead a Kabbalat Shabbat service for women only on Friday evening (without the recitation of Kaddish or Borchu) in the synagogue itself. Following his lead, scores of Chabad congregations have permitted similar activities. From here, it is destined to spread to Orthodox synagogues across the country.



Ever since they were babies, our daughters' nightly blessings, in addition to the *Shema*, have included our family-created benedictions. "I am strong, I am powerful, I am intelligent, I am unique, I am sensitive, I am special, and I can do anything." Later add-ons include: "I will care about the poor, etc." Little did I know when Felissa mouthed these sentences with words whose meaning she did not well comprehend, that a decade later she would radiate the holiness, the spirituality and confidence as she led the Women's Tefillah at her own bat mitzvah. As she studied from the same Tikkun that I used for my own bar mitzvah, I took pride in her learning and in her role as a trailblazer. We created a framework within which she had the option to participate in the rituals, no less than in a bar mitzvah. It was her decision to go forward. She worked hard. She gave up a lot. She made it all worthwhile and made me a believer -- a believer that our daughters' granddaughters will be full participants in all aspects of religious ritual practice. Amen.

- Golden Beach, Florida
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I am intelligent, I am unique,
I am sensitive, I am special,
and I can do anything."

